

Sexual Desire and Sexual Effectiveness in African Marriages: Assessing the Christians' Perceptions in the Moravian Church in Tanzania, Eastern Province

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Abstract

Sexual inability among African men and women is not uncommon in the current African context raising various perceptions. This study endeavoured to discern the perceptions of some Christians of two Congregations of the Eastern Province of the Moravian Church in Tanzania Eastern Province—Mbezi Luis and Mabibo—regarding the two fundamental concepts of sexuality: sexual desire and sexual effectiveness. A qualitative study was conducted by using structured interviews with eight (8) participants randomly selected among Christians of the mentioned congregations. Results indicated that participants had diverse views regarding the causes and effects of lack of sexual desire and effectiveness between couples ranging from psychological, biological, and traditional ones. It is suggested in this study that premarital and post-marital counselling and education should be provided to couples to increase the effectiveness in the mentioned important aspects of human sexuality.

Keywords: African Marriage, Sexual Desire, Sexual Effectiveness, Mbezi Luis and Mabibo Congregations, Qualitative Research

1.0 Introduction

The concept of sexuality has multifaceted meanings from scientific points of view. This article understands it as a “complex interplay of multiple facets, including anatomical, physiological, psychological, developmental, cultural, and relational factors” (Montgomery, 2008, p. 50). This complex interplay comprises seven components: Gender identity, orientation, and intention, which form a human sexual identity, and desire, arousal, orgasm, and emotional satisfaction, which form human sexual function (Meixel, Yanchar & Fugh-Berman, 2015; Montgomery, 2008). This article focuses on sexual desires and sexual effectiveness. The Board of Faith and Life (2013, p. 6) summarizes the meaning of sexuality as “One way to speak of human sexuality is ‘embodied desire for intimacy. Sexual intercourse is one expression of the embodied desire for intimacy, which is human sexuality.’”

Historically, the rate of sexual desire and effectiveness in African marriages was more applicable to both sides involving couples (male and female). The nature and rate of sexual desire and effectiveness in African marriages were controlled by gender issues used by a particular society to guide those children, both male and female, in separate. For many African tribes, the time regarded as a proper one to involve in matters concerning sexual desire and effectiveness was during puberty as well as the time proceeding puberty stage.

From this stage, man and woman were given a chance to form a new family; furthermore, in many African marriages, the male child was allowed to have more than one wife (women), while the female child was strictly prohibited from having more than one husband. Men were allowed to have many wives due to traditional reasons that, one having many wives symbolized

effectiveness and being strong in controlling various surrounding problems. Two or more women were used as sources of family wealth to men as were there for providing and producing manpower. In that case, being married to many women and bearing many children also symbolized the sexual effectiveness of the husband in an African point of view (Sultana, 2010).

Despite the fact that males had many wives previously, their marriages were very stable and affirmed; this situation accelerated African marriages' sexual desire and effectiveness. The stability and affirmation of African marriages in those days resulted from separation teaching provided to each side of sex; the teachings aimed at elucidating the responsibilities of males and females based on their genders. For example, females were taught to accept their husbands, be tolerant in marriages, and love each other even when husbands are married to more than one wife. Men were taught to be tolerant and very secret if their wives committed adultery and were pregnant out of marriage (Saltana, 2010).

Based on the above-stated background, our thesis is that sexual desire and effectiveness in African marriages are controversial in current days, especially in the Moravian Church in Tanzania (MCT) Eastern Province. The controversial nature of these aspects of sexuality is exacerbated by the private nature of the aspects themselves. To address this thesis, we discuss the following themes from experiences and perceptions of research participants: concepts of sexual desire and effectiveness, causes of lack of sexual desire among couples in the MCT Eastern Province, causes of lack of sexual effectiveness among couples, and challenges facing people lacking sexual desires.

1.2 Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on issues of sexuality, especially in medical and psychological researches (Butti *et al.*, 2019; Mutagaywa, 2014; Nyalile *et al.*, 2020; Okechi, 2018). In theological researches, most studies relating to sexuality focus on God's plan for humanity during creation and how married couples should live decent Christian marriages for the glory of God (Koertner, 2009; National Association of Evangelicals, 2012; Van Klinken & Obadare, 2018).

In an African marriage point of view, the question of sexuality is considered sacrosanct and is surrounded by taboos and rules, which every African entering into marriage is supposed to observe. For example, Okechi (2018) did a research about the trend of perception of sex and sexual relationship among African people in the face of globalization in the Nigerian context. Okechi discovered that the onset of globalization in the African context sidetracked people's perceptions of sexuality in African marriage to more unnecessary taboos and moral systems.

However, very few studies in medical and psychological researches concentrated on issues of sexual desire and sexual effectiveness in general (Betregiorgis *et al.*, 2020; Montgomery, 2018). Moreover, there is hardly a study specifically devoted to these key aspects of sexuality in theological studies in the Tanzanian context, and in African marriage in particular, a gap being addressed by this study. To fill the above-stated goal, the following section first discusses the materials and methods before discussing the respective themes.

2.0 Materials and Methods

A research methodology outlines how research was executed to obtain research information to solve a particular problem (Jonker & Pennik, 2010, p. 17). This study used a qualitative approach benefiting from the interpretivist philosophical underpinnings (Corbetta, 2003; Jackson II & Drummond, 2007). Data were collected from two parishes of the Moravian church in Tanzania Eastern Province, Mbezi Luis and Mabibo in Dar es Salaam, between March and Mei 2021. These parishes were used for data collection because one of the authors experienced the various perceptions of sexuality among parish members, which raised an interest to him to conduct research on sexual desire and sexual effectiveness. Qualitative interviewing in the face-to-face interview was performed using the Swahili language (as a medium of communication) and structured questions, whereby eight research participants participated in the study (Denscombe, 2010). Following the urgency of the issues researched, participants were asked to provide their own consent after describing to them the objectives of our study, the possible risks for their participation, the way data would be handled after collection, and the way they would benefit from the collected data. The data collected were transcribed into English, organized, and analyzed qualitatively to obtain themes. The obtained themes are presented and discussed in the following sections.

3.0 Concepts of Sexual Desire and Sexual Effectiveness

Various questions were posed to Christians who belong to the two parishes of the MCT Eastern Province in Dar es Salaam City to ascertain the way they provided meaning to concepts of sexual desire and sexual effectiveness. First, participant **B** (personal communication, April 21, 2021) was asked: *From your understanding, what are the terms sexual desire and*

sexual effectiveness mean? Participant B (personal communication April 21, 2021) responded by saying that “sexual desire refers to a passion or ambition to perform sexual intercourse. And sexual effectiveness refers to sexual intercourse involving satisfaction and producing anticipated results among couples usually leading to orgasm.”

These words indicated that sexual desire was a term that focused on an ambition to perform a sexual act. In contrast, sexual effectiveness focused on satisfaction on the sexual act during sexual intercourse between couples.

A question was asked to all participants: *Are adequate sexual desire and effectiveness available among members of your congregation?* In responding to this question, participants provided diverse responses. It means that some participants agreed on the availability or presence of adequate sexual desire and effectiveness among church members. For example, participant **D** (personal communication April 22, 2021) positively said: *“It is available to some members of my congregation, especially those in marriage. This is indicated by their various peaceful life conducts.”* According to this participant, peaceful life conduct was the determinant of sexual desire and effectiveness. The participant perceived that a lack of effective sexuality could hardly sustain a peaceful marriage.

Other participants had both negative and positive perceptions regarding the presence of adequate sexual desire and satisfaction among Christians in their congregations. For example, participant **D** (personal communication April 21, 2021) had these words: *“The sexual desire and effectiveness is in both sides, to some households is available and to some is not.”* The side which defended the view that sexual desire and

effectiveness were available was also supported by participant **E** (personal communication, May 30, 2021), who emphasized that *“Couples who are comfortable with their marriages can be seen from their facial expressions; when they move together. It means that their faces express desire and romantic elements.”* According to this participant, the situation can be clearly noted in their collaboration during church duties among couples and a rejoicing tendency among church members in marriages. Therefore, based on this side of data, even though couples perform the issue of sexual desire and effectiveness, society can determine strengths and weaknesses through various indicators such as the way of working together and facial expressions.

The side of the absence of sexual desire and effectiveness in Christian households indicated that *“In congregations, most couples are not comfortable to each other rather than living in a stressed life.”* Participant **F** (personal communication April 21, 2021) said that this was observed mostly when couples met in various areas; they always appeared under stress, rising unnecessary complaints, and lacking friendship/collaboration when performing church duties. Therefore, this impression among members of Mbezi Luis and Mabibo congregations showed that it was not a hundred per cent that couples in congregations were perfect in terms of sexual desire and sexual effectiveness.

The question seemed very challenging to other participants since the issue was too personal, confidential, and subjective. For instance, participant **A** (personal communication April 24, 2021) said, *“This is a challenging question to answer because of being very personal and subjective.”* Based on the above responses, issues of sexual desire and effectiveness can hardly be perceived in only one dimension but various dimensions,

depending on the experiences of each individual. However, Segraves (2008:23) concurs with the multifaceted nature of sexual desire as a human disorder when he writes: “*Epidemiological studies have found that problems with sexual desires are one of the most common sexual complaints in females. Such complaints are far less common in males, in women, problems with sexual desire have been found to be associated with age, relationship duration, relationship distress, and complaints of anxiety and depression*” (Aggleton & Crewe, 2005; Cappelletti & Wallen, 2016; Montgomery, 2008; Meixel, Yanchar, & Fugh-Berman, 2015). The above-presented findings indicate the concepts of sexual desire and effectiveness to African Christian marriages occur in various dimensions to mean that there are some members of marriages in congregations that are very effective and have erotic love. In contrast, others are not good in this sexual/marriage act causing family problems. Hence, the issue remains controversial since there is no common answer in the abovementioned sources.

3.1 Causes of Lack of Sexual Desires among Christian Couples

Having discussed the way participants perceived the concepts of sexual desire and sexual effectiveness in the previous section, we inquired about the causes for the lack of sexual desires among Christian couples. Among the questions asked was this: What are the causes of lacking sexual desire among couples in your congregation/church? This was the key question concerning this section which intended to determine the causes of lack of sexual desire among Christian couples. Responses from participants from Mbezi Luis and Mabibo congregations in the Eastern province showed the following general dimensions regarding the causes of lack of sexual desire among couples. The first ones were *psychological reasons*.

Here the cause of lack of sexual desire among couples seemed to be psychologically based. For example, anger could cause a lack of desire among couples if not controlled for long. If one did not provide room for forgiveness on a certain problem that could lead to a lack of sexual desire between couples. Individuals filled with anger could hardly have adequate feelings for doing sex. Perception from participants indicated that most women in African couples thought only men were responsible for asking for forgiveness regarding an offence related to sexual matters. So, when the husband failed to discover the problem for a long time and did not ask for forgiveness, it made wives lose sexual desires. Moreover, cheating among the couples led to lacking sexual desire. It means that when one of the couples determined that he/she was cheated, automatically, the desire to perform sex stopped or became minimal.

The second were biological reasons: Participants' perceptions indicated that various biological factors could cause the loss of sexual desire among couples. The factors included severe/long-term sicknesses such as diabetes, blood pressure, excessive bleeding for women, the practice of Female Genital mutilation as well as aging was some biological reasons leading to lack of sexual desire among couples. Other biological factors, such as homosexual orientation, could also accelerate the loss of sexual desire among couples. Therefore, according to the perceptions of participants, the biological state of the couple was the great determinant of sexual desires between couples that required attention to return couples to normal sexual situations.

The third was spiritual reasons: Participants conveyed their perceptions of occult powers that could cause some couples to lose sexual abilities. According to this perception, some couples

lose their sexual desire due to spiritual powers overlapping between couples. The spiritual powers included superstition, taboos, witchcraft, and magic powers. All these powers resulted in the loss of sexual desire among couples if were not controlled. Therefore, the causes of lacking sexual desire could result from various factors as the perceptions have just indicated in participants' perceptions (Fox II, 2006). However, there is no permanent/constant factor to be considered as the cause of the challenge. The source can be grouped in psychological, biological, and spiritual comprising multifaceted issues in each category.

3.2 Causes of Sexual In-effectiveness in Marriages

When participants were asked about the causes of Christian couples having ineffective sexual performance in their marriages, the following were their general perceptions: First, they indicated that there were Traditional causes for that ineffectiveness. It means that some conducts abiding with traditional practices made couples ineffective in marriages, especially in sexual acts. As noted in the causes of sexual desire discussed above, those traditional conducts included superstition, bad taboos, witchcraft, and other local beliefs or practice. Those aspects could cause sexual ineffectiveness if not handled critically. Participants' perceptions showed that the issue of traditional beliefs was very common in many African marriages because in Africa, many people are connected with clans and family practices that make them involved in such local beliefs, either directly or indirectly.

Moreover, in this traditional cause, perceptions from participants show that there were some gender issues and moral values conducted in African marriages that accelerated the level of sexual ineffectiveness in marriages. For example, the

prohibition of women and men to be more active in sexual-related teachings to couples led many African marriages to be dull and ineffective. Couples lack the necessary skills of performing sex, leading them to superficial performance. This means that couples in most African marriages are involved in sexual acts with their partners without any pre-preparation or very minimal preparation for each other, a situation leading to the lack of adequate feeling for the sexual act. Partners mostly perform sex as raping each other; hence, causing sexual ineffectiveness in marriage.

Second, participants indicated the existence of biological causes. Based on participants' perceptions, this factor can be termed as the main cause of sexual ineffectiveness in many marriages because in normal ways sexual ineffectiveness is the result of hormonal disorders in the human body. These hormonal and biological disorders can mostly be caused by excessive alcoholism, severe sickness, diabetes, obesity, too much hardworking, homosexuality, and heterosexuality. Hence, the mentioned aspects are some biological factors that could cause severe sexual ineffectiveness to people.

Third, participants indicated the existence of psychological causes. Here, participants' perceptions showed that if members of marriages were not well mind settled in their marriages, sexual ineffectiveness could rise in either side or both sides. It means that various mindset problems that could lead to sexual ineffective in marriages, including economic problems, cheating on either side of marriages through committing adultery, watching pornographic images, and other related activities.

Similar factors have been highlighted by Butt *et al.* (2018:1) when they say:

Female sexual dysfunction is a common problem globally, and the factors associated with it have been highlighted in the literature and broadly divided into five main groups. These include biological factors such as hormonal status that the use of hormonal contraception can influence; demographic factors such as age and education levels; psychological factors, including mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression; socio-cultural factors such as religion and traditional customs; and finally the pathophysiological factors that are complications associated with chronic conditions such as diabetes mellitus and rheumatoid arthritis (Lavender, n.d.).

These factors and related factors, if not controlled, can make members of marriages face sexual ineffective in marriages.

3.3 Challenges Facing People Lacking Sexual Desires

Participants were asked questions to determine their views regarding challenges facing people lacking sexual desires. The following question was posed: *Are there any challenges facing people lacking sexual desire, which are they?* Responses provided by participants in the field showed that challenges of sexual desire in congregations were available to some members of couples. Basing on their responses, the challenges facing people lacking sexual desire could be grouped into the following categories: First, they faced psychological torture in their lives. This means that issues of lacking sexual desire made them have poor performance due to lack of mind settlement. Second, they faced acute problems which ended them in quarrels with their spouses because the one without sexual desire lacked sexual bargaining power. He/she was forced to do sex despite his/her desire (Machera, 2004). Third, they faced an inferiority complex because of thought that everybody around

them knew their weaknesses. Inferiority complex led them to fear to argue on various matters surrounding their lives as their defense mechanism. That situation made their contributions disappear though could be helpful in particular issues. Fourth, they developed a scar among them if the problem could not be treated for a long time. That meant that, to many couples in African societies, the situation of lacking sexual desire in either side of couples could be tolerated for some time, not for all times. If one of the couples knew his/her fitness, he/she could develop anxiety and decide to detach from the relationship. That detachment could consequently lead to the development of a scar on either side. Fifth, they could be led to committing suicide due to severe day-to-day pains resulting from the challenge they face. It means that sometimes couples could like to talk on how they felt bad/worse about the situation they lived in; instead, they decided to kill themselves as a way of becoming free from the challenges. Therefore, these are some challenges faced by people lacking sexual desire according to Christian research participants from Mbezi Luis and Mabibo congregations, congregations of the Moravian Church in Tanzania Eastern province.

3.4 Challenges facing People Lacking Sexual Effectiveness

This section focuses on the various issues associated with challenges facing people lacking sexual effectiveness among Christians of Mbezi Luis and Mabibo congregations. The perceptions from research participants indicated that the challenge of lacking sexual effectiveness could be psychological, biological, and spiritual. Psychologically, challenges were most likely similar to those facing the lack of sexual desire; they included inferiority complex, and immoral behaviours, such as sexual misconduct, secrete homosexuality, and adultery could lead to lacking sexual effectiveness to most

married couples in different households. Biologically, factors which accelerated the problem included unstopped illnesses and sicknesses, severe drunkenness or intoxication, too much physical works, and aging. Participants reported these and other related ones to possibly cause a challenge of lacking sexual effectiveness to most couples in different families. Spiritually, some couples lack the fear of God; this made them lose protection from God and accelerated the domination of evil acts such as superstition, witchcraft, and other similar acts leading to loss of effectiveness in sexual performance. Moreover, participants' perceptions indicated that differences in beliefs or taboos could cause a failure to have effective sexual performance. Other factors that could lead to the challenge of lacking sexual effectiveness, according to participants, included economic reasons (collapse in economic affairs), boredom, and involvement in polygyny and polyandry.

Participants were further asked: What are the challenges facing people lacking sexual effectiveness in your congregation? This question sought to investigate participants' views on the possible challenges facing people lacking effectiveness, especially in African Christian marriages. The following were some of their views: First, most of them had high probabilities of committing divorce due to dissatisfaction regarding sexual matters in either side of couples; hence, the ones who observed weaknesses, especially for some time, could quit marriages and find partners that could satisfy them sexually. Second, most of them lived unhappy marriages because sexual acts were basic to any marriage. So, if the family or marriage encountered that problem, it led to a sad situation which accelerated quarrels among couples in the future. Third, the situation led to polygamous marriages as an alternative way of seeking

satisfaction, especially to males who had a chance to do that in many African societies. Fourth, there were possibilities of sexual cheating between couples. In most cases, the rate of cheating was greater for husbands than for wives, which eventually led to sexual infidelity even among wives.

3.5 The Church's Role towards People Lacking Sexual Desire

The previous sub-topics have discussed various problems and challenges concerning marriage sexual desire and sexual effectiveness in most Christian marriages. This section discusses the church's possible roles to people lacking sexual desire and sexual effectiveness. Several questions were asked to participants to ascertain their views regarding the church's role. One of such questions was: *Is your church responsible for people lacking sexual desire?* Responses to this question show that the church was partly responsible for people facing the problem/challenges of lacking sexual desire. Participants provided the reasons for the church's partial responsibility during the interview sessions: First, the church became responsible for the issue because Christian preaching/teaching emphasized human multiplications, peace, love, and others alike. So, the church was directly involved in neutralizing and solving sexual matters of its members. Since the issue of sexuality is the core part of marriages; it required the utmost attention of the church. Second, the church was responsible for its members because it was both a spiritual and physical institution that needed people with good performance in church affairs to rectify poor situations to an institution and create results in economic, social, cultural, and spiritual areas. To maintain effective well-being, the church was responsible to ensure that marriage issues, including sexual desires and

effectiveness, were settled before they disrupted the anticipated order. Third, the church was responsible to its members because its task was to bring people to God; therefore, it needed people who were comfortable psychologically and physically to attain the required spiritual power. Christians whose sexuality disrupted the psychological and physical harmony could hardly attain the anticipated spiritual enlightenment.

The perception of participants indicated that the church was for some extent playing its role towards people lacking sexual desire. It performed this role in various ways, including providing related preaching or teaching to church members, conducting door-to-door services, organizing seminars and workshops, and educating Christians on issues of sexuality. In some special cases, the church provided financial support to those people who required scientific checkups. Therefore, participants' views indicate that the role of the church upon people having deficiencies on issues of sexuality is there, despite its weaknesses.

3.6 Theological Reflection on Human Sexual Ability

Theological reflection refers to assessment based on religious faith such as Christian, Islamic, African traditional faiths, and others. This section provides a theological reflection according to the Christian faith because the investigation is generally based on the Christian point of view. In the Christian Bible, God offers various principles and instructions for people to complement and implement sexual issues. Some important themes include: First, human sexual ability is compulsory to married couples. The Bible shows the importance of human sexual ability in the very beginning of the Bible in creation stories. According to creation stories, the human being is an outcome of sexual ability. The book of Genesis states: "And

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; ... (1:28)’ It adds, “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and conceived and bore Cain... (4:1)” Moreover, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) (2012, p. 2) puts it clear: “Human sexuality and sex are good gifts of God, given from the beginning of creation. In the first and second chapters of Genesis, we discover that God created humans with sexual capacity, sexual drives, a mandate for procreation, and longing for physical oneness. After God had created humans—male and female in his image—he looked at all he had made and pronounced it ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31).” Therefore, the above-cited verses show that without effective human sexual ability, the earth can hardly be filled, no procreation will be realized, and God’s gift to humanity becomes defective. It means that God created a desire for humanity to realize sexuality for the procreative purpose (Joo, 2015).

The Bible further emphasizes about human sexual ability, that after a marital union between a male and a female, no one is free on his or her body: “For the wife does not rule over own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not over his body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season” (1Corinthians 7:4–5). Therefore, the issue of human sexual ability here requires being active to each side (male and female) to realize these biblical instructions.

Second, the human sexual ability is allowed only to the two (male and female) couples who are recognized Christian married couples. The Bible expresses the legitimacy of sexuality in the concept of leaving, that couples have to leave their relatives and be united as husband and wife being one

flesh: “for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh” (Ephesians 5:31). Marriage is a long life contract between one male and one female to be respected by all members of society: “*Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral adulterous*” (Hebrews 13:4).

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The issue of sexual desire and effectiveness in African marriages is very complicated. Responses from research participants show a variety of experiences and perceptions. These experiences and perceptions were sought to respond to the thesis underlying our study that sexual desire and effectiveness in African Christian marriages in current days are controversial ones. Results have shown that participants had a varied understanding of the concepts of sexual desire and sexual effectiveness. Most challenges African Christian marriage couples encountered ranged from physical, biological, and cultural. It has been ascertained that the role of the church is fundamental to maintaining harmony with its members regarding the two important aspects of marriage.

Therefore, based on the responses from interviewees, we recommend that the church should not be silent in addressing issues of sexuality to its members. It requires dealing with complications relating to sexual desire and effectiveness facing marriages of its members in all dimensions. It is our conviction that if issues of sexuality are taken seriously, the vitality of the church of God in the MCT Eastern Province, and Africa as a whole, maybe fully sustained.

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